

Wakeup Call: Soviet Naval Policy and the Cuban Missile Crisis

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation  
*with distinction* in History in the undergraduate colleges  
of The Ohio State University

by

Andrew Pfister

The Ohio State University  
May 2005

Project Adviser: Professor Jennifer Siegel, Department of History

## **Introduction**

When asked in a 1972 Senate hearing about the United States Navy's theoretical odds of success in conventional naval combat with the Soviet Union, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, the Chief of Naval Operations, gave the dismaying answer that "we would lose."<sup>1</sup> Zumwalt's assessment is notable for its extreme pessimism about the balance of naval power and the fact that it was shared by many of his colleagues. What is more interesting about this incident, however, is how it compares with the U.S. Navy's opinion of the Soviet naval threat little more than two decades earlier. In the late 1940s Vice Admiral Forrest P. Sherman had expressed a commonly held perception when he opined that most of the Soviet Navy was of "low combat value," aside from the submarine force, which would not be overly difficult to deal with.<sup>2</sup> In a mere 25 years the outlook of the U.S. Navy's leadership had changed from confident predictions of victory to gloomy forecasts of defeat. This dramatic decline in optimism demonstrates just how much the Soviet Navy's capabilities grew over the course the Cold War.

Despite eager professional interest in naval doctrine and various plans for the development of stronger forces, the Soviet Union had been a weak sea power since its birth. Though the Soviet Navy was a large fighting force at the end of World War II, the fleet was best suited to acting as a defensive force close to home waters. In addition, the Navy had certain shortcomings in its structure. While the Soviet Navy fielded a large

---

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Muir, Jr., *Black Shoes and Blue Water: Surface Warfare in the United States Navy, 1945-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1996), 202. Zumwalt's answer arose from dual concerns: the growth of the Soviet Navy and the decline of the U.S. Navy due to the impact of Vietnam. Even bearing this in mind however, his starkly negative tone is striking compared to the attitudes of the 1940s.

<sup>2</sup> Michael A. Palmer, *Origins of the Maritime Strategy: The Development of American Naval Strategy, 1945-1955* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1990), 38-39, 68-69.

submarine force for example, its surface force was small and relatively weak. Events during the Cold War would show that this sort of short-ranged, unbalanced fleet could only provide a limited challenge to the naval strength of the United States.

Though no single incident created change, one particular event served more than any other to educate the Kremlin about the Soviet Navy's inadequacy for the Cold War environment: the Cuban Missile Crisis. The failure of the Soviet Navy to effectively support the Kremlin's policies during this conflict, where the vital interest of nuclear security was at stake, provided a shocking wake up call to the government. This, in turn, gave a much needed boost to Soviet naval professionals arguing for more attention and resources from the greater military community. The confrontation of 1962 helped to spur the development of a balanced and strong naval force capable of supporting the Soviet Union's interests and threatening the previous dominance of western naval power. By the 1970s, the changes were already so dramatic that the American Chief of Naval Operations took the above-mentioned skeptical view of the U.S. Navy's chances in an actual shooting war. The Soviet Navy would continue to gain in strength up until the very end of the Cold War, thanks to the humiliation suffered by the Soviet Union in a confrontation over a small Caribbean country in the 1960s.

## **Soviet Naval Development Before, During, and After World War II**

### **Wartime Experiences and Lessons**

The Soviet Navy played a very different sort of role in World War II than did the navies of other major combatants. The Soviets did not engage in any major fleet actions with their enemies, nor were naval forces sent to distant theaters of combat to fight. The Soviet Navy generally operated only in areas directly contiguous to its country's own territory, and most of the time it fought in direct support of ground forces.<sup>3</sup> In part, the limits on Soviet naval action came from the thinking that dominated professional Soviet military circles in the late 1930s. Supporting the ground forces had been specifically listed in 1939 as one of the Soviet Navy's missions, and the concept had existed in one form or another going back to the earliest iterations of Soviet naval theory.<sup>4</sup>

The other major limitation on the Soviet Navy arose early in the war due to geography and the overall military situation. The Soviets lost several major naval bases and building yards on the Baltic and Black Sea coasts due to the rapid German land advances. The loss of such important facilities impeded the Soviet Navy's ability to conduct combat operations and repair its ships. More importantly however, the Soviets were forced to abandon or destroy unfinished naval vessels that might have proven valuable later in the war. While the Soviet Union was still able to produce smaller

---

<sup>3</sup> V.I. Achkasov and N.B. Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1981), 362-363.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Rohwer and Mikhail S. Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet: Soviet Naval Strategy and Shipbuilding Programmes, 1935-1953* (Portland, OR, Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 105; Robert W. Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1988), 12.

vessels such as submarines, torpedo boats, and minesweepers, lack of adequate facilities meant that there was little progress in the production of larger ships between 1942 and 1944.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in addition to being hampered by lack of bases, the Soviet Navy was by and large forced to rely on older, less capable equipment (some of it dating back to the Tsarist period) during much of World War II.

The Soviet Navy's wartime experience then was largely one of coastal combat with small vessels on the flanks of the Soviet Army. Surface ships, submarines, and naval aircraft attacked German supply convoys. Minefields were laid and enemy mines cleared. Small amphibious assaults were carried out behind German lines, often in concert with Soviet Army operations. Early in the war there were even occasions when Soviet sailors and marines were deployed as ground troops in an effort to augment the Army's position. In 1945 the Soviet Navy also conducted limited operations against Japan in the Pacific theater.<sup>6</sup>

These actions, while important to the Soviet Union's overall war effort, were experiences that would be of only limited utility during the Cold War period. Naval combat by other countries was a different matter, though, and the Soviets examined the role of other navies with great interest. The carrier air operations and large-scale amphibious landings carried out by the United States and Great Britain were of particular interest to Soviet naval professionals.<sup>7</sup> The Soviets learned how important aircraft carriers had been to the U.S. Navy's operations during World War II, especially in the Pacific theater. They also understood that the postwar American navy would be built

---

<sup>5</sup> Rohwer and Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher C. Lovett, "The Russian/Soviet Navy, 1900-1945," in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, eds. Robin Higham and Frederick W. Kagan, 190-193 (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory*, 141.

around the aircraft carrier. Likewise the Soviet defense thinkers saw how skillful the U.S Navy had become at staging large amphibious operations in order to seize enemy-held territory. These two elements combined had given American naval forces an unmatched capability for quickly projecting military force to any corner of the world with an ocean or a coastline.

The leaders of the Soviet Navy understood that if they had to fight the United States in the future, it was essential that they build a navy properly equipped and structured to deal with carrier aviation and amphibious forces. Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, who became the Soviet Navy's greatest advocate during the Cold War, summed up the situation as he had seen it in the immediate postwar period, and the conclusion that the professional naval community had reached:

The threat to the security of our country from the oceans loomed ever larger. Could the Soviet Union, faced with such a threat, agree with the age-old dominance on the seas and oceans of the Western maritime powers...? Of course not!<sup>8</sup>

Though they would not come out and say it directly, Admiral Gorshkov and other Soviet naval officers of the early postwar years realized that the Soviet Navy as it existed then was simply unprepared for the Cold War. To fight the U.S. Navy effectively, a more modern and robust naval force was required. Within this realization was the foundation of what would one day be the formidable fighting force that was the Soviet Navy of the 1970s and 1980s. There would be many other developments, however, before this seed of an idea would have the chance to grow to its full potential.

### **Stalin's Vision for the Fleet, 1945-1953**

---

<sup>8</sup> S.G. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1979), 178.

The postwar Soviet Navy had among its patrons the most powerful man in the Soviet Union: Josef Stalin. An ardent and long-time advocate of a strong Soviet military, Stalin's wish for a stronger navy inspired plans for a large new program of naval shipbuilding in 1935. It is likely that the Soviet leader was concerned by the naval arms race of the 1930s and especially by construction programs in Japan and Germany, since both countries were viewed as likely adversaries.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately for the Soviets, many of the ships authorized under Stalin's prewar plans would never be completed due to the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Germany and the consequent early loss of important shipbuilding facilities noted above.

After the end of World War II, Stalin was more concerned than ever about implementing a program of naval construction and improvement. Stalin had long been obsessed with the Soviet Union's territorial security, and it is likely that in the wake of the devastation caused by World War II he became more concerned than ever. In addition, Stalin's personal nature played an important role in his concern for the Soviet Union's defense and, in turn, his interest in a strong postwar Navy. He was a deeply xenophobic man, and for much of his reign was worried that western governments were conspiring against the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup>

There were also new postwar military realities that were important for Stalin to consider. The U.S. Navy's powerful aircraft carrier fleet and amphibious forces were regarded as very real threats to the Soviet Union's territory in the event of war. The exposure of the Baltic coast and the Black Sea regions to seaborne attack was especially worrisome, given that the loss of bases in these regions to German forces during World

---

<sup>9</sup> Rohwer and Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet*, 58-59, 60-62.

<sup>10</sup> Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996), 17, 22-24.

War II had created major problems for the Soviet war effort. Furthermore, the U.S. Navy was developing a strong presence in the Mediterranean, in effect bringing its much respected and feared abilities right to the Soviet Union's doorstep.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that Stalin had a very clear understanding of the military threat his country faced from American naval power, and that the combination of his personal fears with the analysis of the military situation generated a strong will in the Soviet leader to correct the naval shortcomings that had existed for so long.

In 1945 the Navy responded to Stalin's wishes and requested a construction program that called for several battleships, dozens of cruisers, and a large number of other, smaller vessels. A handful of aircraft carriers were also included in the plan, evidence of the healthy respect Soviet naval leaders had for these potent vessels. Unfortunately for the Soviet Navy, the country could not muster the resources necessary to fulfill the proposed construction program. All Soviet industry had suffered massive damage during the course of the war, and the shipyards were no exception. At the end of the war the Soviet Union's shipbuilding capacity was less than half of what it had been in 1940. Due to the lack of resources, less ambitious shipbuilding programs had to be developed.<sup>12</sup>

A war-weakened shipbuilding industry was not the only obstacle confronting the Navy. There was also disagreement over the structure of the new fleet. The debate over the necessity and utility aircraft carriers was especially problematic. For many years there had been arguments in Soviet defense circles about whether or not aircraft carriers

---

<sup>11</sup> Christopher C. Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," in *The Military History of the Soviet Union* (see note 6), 238-239.

<sup>12</sup> Lovett, "The Russian/Soviet Navy, 1900-1945," 185-186; A.S. Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia, 1945-1995* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1997), xviii.



should be added to the fleet. After the carrier had proven itself in World War II, high ranking naval officers and theorists were convinced that such vessels would be an essential addition to the Navy.<sup>13</sup> Stalin, on the other hand, was more skeptical. Given the threat the U.S. Navy's carrier airpower posed to his country, Stalin must have appreciated how powerful such assets could be in the right situation. However, he felt that aircraft carriers would not be useful to his country because of the Soviet Union's unique maritime situation, and thus did not support their addition to the fleet. Stalin believed that in most of the theaters the Soviet Navy was likely to have to fight in, the close proximity of Soviet airfields would allow the use of shore-based naval aviation and obviate the need for aircraft carriers. The Navy's then Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Kuznetsov, pressed the issue however, and Stalin reluctantly agreed that the future building program should include two light aircraft carriers.<sup>14</sup> Later even these two ships would be stricken from the construction plans, however.

In its final form the postwar shipbuilding program, known as the Ten-Year Plan, was a mere shadow of the Navy's original proposal. The planned numbers for many types of smaller ships remained steady, and for some types even increased. The number of heavy surface ships had dropped dramatically, however. Battleships and heavy cruisers were removed completely (with the exception of four battlecruisers), while the number of light cruisers was cut in half. Aircraft carriers, as previously mentioned, also disappeared from the plan, forcing the Navy to rely on shore-based aviation for air support.<sup>15</sup> These final numbers fell far short of what the Navy had originally requested, but were probably far more realistic given the condition of Soviet industry after World

---

<sup>13</sup> Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory*, p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Rohwer and Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet*, 187.

<sup>15</sup> Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia*, xviii.

War II. The Ten-Year Plan construction program, which was scheduled to last from 1946 to 1955, was at least a step in the right direction for the Soviet Navy. The success of the effort, however, would be short-lived, and events in the 1950s would soon pose an even greater challenge to the Navy's attempts to adapt to Cold War conditions.

### **Khrushchev's Vision for the Fleet, 1954-1962**

In 1953 Josef Stalin died, and the reins of power in the Soviet Union soon passed to a different man, Nikita Khrushchev. This meant not only a change in political leadership for the country, but also a change in defense policy. Khrushchev, like Stalin, had strong opinions about what sort of military force the Soviet Union required, and thus also took a prominent personal role in military decisions. The Soviet Navy would quickly feel the impact of the leadership change as Khrushchev's ideas were implemented.

Khrushchev's primary concern was that the naval forces being developed under the Ten-Year Plan were not fit for the environment they would operate in. While he was not opposed to sea power in general, Khrushchev saw limited utility in heavy surface ships, especially in view of how much they cost to build and operate. The Soviet leader summed up his views on surface warships in his memoirs:

Gone were the days when the heavy cruiser and the battleship were the backbone of a navy. It still made a beautiful picture when the crew lined up smartly at attention on the deck of a cruiser to receive an admiral or call on a friendly foreign port. But such ceremonies were now just an elegant luxury...<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Stephen S. Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1981), 163.

On top of his own dim view of surface warships, Khrushchev had chosen a like-minded military officer to be one of his closest advisors. Marshal Georgiy Zhukov was an Army officer who had gained great renown during World War II, and also happened to have little interest in expanding the Soviet Navy. Selected by Khrushchev to be Minister of Defense, Zhukov exploited the power of his new position to mount a campaign against the construction of heavy surface ships, arguing that such vessels were no longer useful.<sup>17</sup>

The high cost of the Navy's construction program was a significant factor in Khrushchev's and Zhukov's opposition, but there were other causes as well. Unlike Stalin, Khrushchev realized that the atomic bomb was shaping the military and political realities of the Cold War. He understood that nuclear weapons were a grave threat to his country. He also knew, though, that nuclear arms were excellent tools of defense, because they could level the strategic playing field between the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>18</sup> Applying this logic to the field of naval warfare, Khrushchev quickly grasped how vulnerable surface warships were to nuclear attack. Proof of this had come as early as 1946 during the Bikini Atoll atomic tests, when the United States had learned how much damage nuclear weapons could do to a fleet of surface ships. Why should the Soviet Union go through the expense of building a large fleet of heavy surface warships that could be destroyed so easily? Furthermore, what was the purpose of having such warships in the first place when nuclear weapons could do the same job more cheaply and efficiently?

With these ideas in mind, it is no wonder that Khrushchev decided to take the Soviet Navy in a new direction. Due to Khrushchev's influence, the Ten-Year Plan never

---

<sup>17</sup> Rohwer and Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet*, 216-217.

<sup>18</sup> Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 188-190.

came anywhere close to realizing its intended goals. None of the battlecruisers were ever completed, and construction of most other types of surface warships fell well short of the authorized numbers. Submarine production fared somewhat better, as did torpedo boats, but even in these categories the resulting force levels were less than that which had been ordered at the start of the program.<sup>19</sup>

While Khrushchev had largely gutted the surface component of Stalin's Ten-Year Plan, it is significant that submarine production was largely spared the axe that lopped off other pieces of the program. In Khrushchev's mind, submarines were an excellent substitute for surface warships, so he directed that the future Soviet Navy should be built around them.<sup>20</sup> Being smaller and less manpower intensive than their surface counterparts, submarines were less expensive to build and operate. More importantly, submarines were also less vulnerable to nuclear weapons, both because they generally did not operate in large groups and because they were more difficult to detect and locate in the first place. Offensively, they were theoretically capable of inflicting as much or more damage than many types of surface warships. Submarines could be made into even more potent weapons when they were armed with nuclear torpedoes or nuclear missiles capable of devastating both sea and land targets.

As has already been mentioned, Khrushchev saw nuclear weapons as a great equalizer between the Soviet Union and the United States. Missiles with nuclear warheads were especially useful in this case, because they could be deployed aboard submarines, thus countering the still worrisome threat posed by American aircraft carriers. Some of the earliest Soviet nuclear-powered submarines, designed in the late

---

<sup>19</sup> Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia*, xviii.

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 164.

1950s and armed with several radar-guided nuclear missiles each, were intended specifically for attacking American aircraft carriers.<sup>21</sup> Other classes of submarines with a similar mission followed in the 1960s.

Not surprisingly, high-ranking naval officers were not happy with Khrushchev's tampering. They had come tantalizingly close to getting the navy they had hoped for, only to see the construction plans gutted due to a change of leadership and defense policies. In contrast to Khrushchev, naval officers still felt there was value in surface warships. The addition of more submarines to the fleet was not in itself a problem, but submarines alone would not create the type of naval force the Soviet Union really needed. The fleet needed to strike a balance between surface and undersea forces, but it seemed that Khrushchev was actually making the balance problem worse than before.

Admiral Kuznetsov, who was still the Navy's Commander-in-Chief, was particularly frustrated by Khrushchev's ideas about the role naval forces should play in modern war, which influenced the Soviet leader's thinking on force structure and shipbuilding. At one point he is reported to have shouted, "How long do I have to tolerate such an attitude toward my navy?"<sup>22</sup> Kuznetsov's objections, however, succeeded in little more than causing Khrushchev to remove the Admiral from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy. Kuznetsov was replaced in this role in 1956 by a younger man, Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, who Khrushchev believed would humbly submit to the political leadership's will regarding naval construction.<sup>23</sup> The new

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael McCwire [sic], *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1987), 408-409.

<sup>22</sup> Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," 241.

<sup>23</sup> John G. Hibbits, "Admiral Gorshkov: Architect of the Soviet Navy," in Sergei G. Gorshkov, *Rising at Sea*, ed. Herbert Preston, trans. Theodore A. Neely, Jr., 144 (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1974).

Commander-in-Chief would later prove to be more independent than Khrushchev originally thought.

Gorshkov was in fact just as staunch in his feelings about sea power as Kuznetsov had been. In the 1950s, however, Gorshkov understood that the time was not yet right for forceful advocacy of naval interests. He therefore went about his job in a more circumspect manner than his predecessor had. While openly supporting Khrushchev's submarine program, Gorshkov played politics in order to salvage what he could from the old Ten-Year Plan. Thanks to his efforts, more than a dozen cruisers that would have otherwise have been scrapped on the building ways were eventually completed and put into service. Most of these cruisers served until the 1980s, a testament to their utility and to Gorshkov's foresight. At the same time, Gorshkov sought to carve a niche for surface forces in the future by getting a class of destroyers armed with anti-ship missiles into production, though the value of even these ships was limited since they had only limited ability to protect themselves from air attack.<sup>24</sup> Though they were small steps, they were all that Gorshkov could realistically expect to accomplish given the political environment at the time.

This, then, was the situation the Soviet Navy found itself in as it entered the 1960s. In purely numerical terms, the fleet was very powerful. Actual capabilities were much more limited than the numbers suggested, however. Khrushchev's views on sea power had served to concentrate the lion's share of the Navy's strength in its submarines. The Navy was also geared primarily for nuclear warfare, almost to the exclusion of other missions. This state of affairs was economically expedient for the government, though, and to Khrushchev it seemed the Navy he was creating would serve its role in protecting

---

<sup>24</sup> Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," 241-242; Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia*, 101, 119.

the security and interests of the Soviet Union. A confrontation of the world's two great superpowers over the island of Cuba would serve to show otherwise.

## **The Soviet Navy and the Cuban Missile Crisis**

### **Cuba and the Strategic Equation**

In the late 1950s, a small group of armed revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro began to wage a campaign in Cuba against then-dictator Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar. Though Batista was nominally supported by the United States, by 1958 it was clear that the Cuban leader was weak, and Washington was less than satisfied with him.<sup>25</sup> This situation might have been favorable for American support of a rebel movement in Cuba, but Fidel Castro did not make the best impression on the United States government, either. This was particularly true when his group kidnapped several Americans in an effort to force Cuba's powerful northern neighbor to drop its support for Batista.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of American feelings, however, Castro's revolution was successful in ousting Batista, and he took his place as Cuba's new leader at the beginning of 1959.

As more time passed, Cuba caused increasing concern among American government officials. It was clear that the new Cuban government was making definite moves toward Communism and becoming an ally of the Soviet Union. It was soon evident, for example, that the Soviets were supplying arms and advisors to strengthen Cuba's military. American intelligence knew that Cuba had received tanks, machine guns, and well over 150,000 rifles from the Soviet Union by 1961.<sup>27</sup> This level of

---

<sup>25</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 128.



support was a clear indicator to Washington that the Kremlin had strong interest in the success of Castro's young government.

Why did the Soviet Union decide to give Cuba such a firm vote of support? To be sure, the move was partially one of ideology. The Soviet government wanted to support revolutions around the globe in the name of international communism, and this was the reason that the initial weapons deliveries to Castro were authorized in 1958.<sup>28</sup> Some in the American government were convinced that this was the Soviet Union's primary motive for supporting Cuba. In a clear articulation of the "domino theory," officials concerned about the perceived threat from communism believed that a successful communist revolution in one country was bound to lead to others in neighboring nations. In the case of Cuba, the argument ran that Castro's success would endanger all of Latin America, and was especially serious given the region's proximity to the continental United States.<sup>29</sup>

Ideology was not the primary motivation for Soviet interest in Cuba however, despite what some in Washington believed. It was something much more pressing and dangerous for both the United States and the Soviet Union: the strategic nuclear balance. By 1962 Khrushchev's belief that nuclear weapons had equalized the American and Soviet strategic positions was rapidly eroding. The United States had far more strategic nuclear weapons than did the Soviet Union, and there was a large disparity in ballistic missiles must have been especially worrisome to Khrushchev. At that time, there were approximately 172 intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, in the American arsenal,

---

<sup>28</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Michael C. Desch, "'That Deep Mud in Cuba:' The Strategic Threat and U.S. Planning for a Conventional Response During the Missile Crisis," *Security Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 319-320.

while the Soviets had a mere 25 available.<sup>30</sup> Intelligence reports in the United States estimated that the number of Soviet ICBMs was closer to 75, which although exaggerated still must have given Washington a comforting sense of strategic advantage.<sup>31</sup>

The Soviet deficit on the nuclear balance sheet was only exacerbated by the situation at sea. Both the United States and the Soviet Union had fielded submarines armed with nuclear ballistic missiles in an effort to bolster the strength and survivability of their nuclear forces. Soviet submarine-launched ballistic missiles, or SLBMs, had a range of about 300 nautical miles however, compared with the 1200 nautical mile range of their American counterparts.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the Soviet Union's sea-based ballistic missiles were nearly all carried in diesel-powered submarines, whereas the American SLBMs were all based aboard more capable and survivable submarines with nuclear propulsion.<sup>33</sup>

In short, the Soviet force of strategic nuclear missiles was smaller, less capable, and more vulnerable than that of the United States. In the Kremlin, this state of affairs must have aroused considerable fear of a scenario whereby the United States could deliver a devastating nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union. Given the quantitative and qualitative American advantage in ballistic missiles, it was theoretically possible for the United States to destroy the Soviet Union's entire inventory of strategic nuclear

---

<sup>30</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Pavel Podvig, ed., *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 314; Graham Spinardi, *From Polaris to Trident: The Development of U.S. Fleet Ballistic Missile Technology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

<sup>33</sup> Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia*, 34-38; Jane's *Fighting Ships 1962-1963* (London: Jane's Fighting Ships Publishing Co., Ltd., 1963), 350-351, 410. The use of diesel versus nuclear-powered submarines to carry nuclear missiles was not as trivial as it might seem. Nuclear submarines were both quieter and faster than equivalent vessels with diesel engines. Also, nuclear submarines could stay submerged for longer periods, and were able to spend more time at sea because they would not run out of fuel. Because the naval component of the American strategic nuclear force was carried exclusively in nuclear submarines, it was more flexible, more survivable, and more lethal than that of the Soviets in this time period.

weapons in a single, coordinated strike. The relatively short time between a missile's launch and arrival at its target meant that the Kremlin would have very little time to react to any American attack, and its potential for nuclear response might be destroyed before it could be used. Without the possibility of a nuclear retaliation, the Soviet Union had no means with which to deter the United States from launching a nuclear war. This notion must have been more than a little unsettling to the Soviet leadership.

Searching for a way to quickly close the nuclear gap, the Kremlin realized that Cuba could offer an excellent shortcut to strategic parity through the use of intermediate and medium range ballistic missiles (IRBMs and MRBMs). These types of strategic missile were the only ones that the Soviets could field more of than the United States.<sup>34</sup> Though they could threaten Western Europe, these weapons posed little direct threat to the Americans. As their designations imply, IRBMs and MRBMs had shorter ranges than ICBMs. The Soviets originally intended to use them for attacking targets in Europe rather than overseas.<sup>35</sup> If placed in Cuba however, these shorter-ranged missiles could easily reach well inside the continental United States. Thus, Cuba gave the Soviet Union the opportunity to use its numerical advantage in medium and intermediate range missiles to balance the strategic equation.

As part of their Cuban deployment, the Soviets wanted to send not only land-based ballistic missile launchers, but also men and equipment to build a submarine base on Cuban territory.<sup>36</sup> Such a base would put the short-ranged Soviet SLBMs within easy reach of targets on the American coastline, and would have been very close to the patrol

---

<sup>34</sup> Desch, "That Deep Mud in Cuba," 323.

<sup>35</sup> Steven J. Zaloga, "Soviet/Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces, 1945-2000," in *The Military History of the Soviet Union* (see note 6), 205.

<sup>36</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 163.

zones of Soviet missile submarines. Even those submarines with diesel propulsion would be able to stay at sea for relatively long periods of time, giving the Soviet Union even more resources to call upon in the event of a nuclear war. Though the extent of patrols by Soviet ballistic missile submarines in that period is still unknown, it is believed that in 1962 any patrols that may have occurred along the coast of the United States were infrequent at best.<sup>37</sup> The ability to maintain frequent and regular patrols would thus have been a huge leap forward in capability for Soviet nuclear forces. The combination of land and sea-based nuclear weapons in Cuba would give the Soviet Union a much stronger strategic position than it had previously enjoyed.

A deployment of Soviet military hardware to Cuba had a major political incentive for Moscow as well. The Cuban leadership had been deeply concerned about the possibility of an American invasion since 1960.<sup>38</sup> The Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 appeared to confirm that the United States had no intention of allowing events in Cuba to follow their own course. While the deployment of missiles to Cuba was supposed to be a clandestine operation, if the weapons were discovered the Soviets could justify the move by claiming that it was done in the interests of Cuban security.<sup>39</sup> It would also be reassuring to Fidel Castro, and hopefully other Soviet client states would read the deployment as a signal that the Soviet Union would take steps to assure the safety of the regimes it chose to support.

Thus, Cuba offered an excellent chance for the Soviet Union to accomplish two goals at once, though the strategic nuclear balance was certainly more important to the Kremlin leaders. Khrushchev viewed a Cuban deployment as a win-win situation, and

---

<sup>37</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 380.

<sup>38</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 47-48

<sup>39</sup> Zaloga, "Soviet/Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces," 207.

would later write that “in addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would equalize what the West likes to call the ‘balance of power.’”<sup>40</sup> It was more than just a favorable development, however. Khrushchev’s policies had forced the country to rely upon missile technology and nuclear weapons as a substitute for development of conventional military forces, especially the Navy. But the United States had beaten the Soviet leader at his own game, creating superior missile technology and deploying the weapons much more quickly. The situation must have been embarrassing to Khrushchev and, from a defense policy standpoint, was extremely dangerous. The opportunity to deploy ballistic missiles to Cuba in 1962 was thus one that the Soviet Union *had* to seize.

### **Soviet Military Deployments to Cuba**

In early June of 1962 Fidel Castro approved the Soviet Union’s request to base military forces on its soil.<sup>41</sup> Plans were quickly drawn up and approved for the stationing of Soviet forces in Cuba. The deployment would include 40 medium and intermediate range ballistic missile launchers, as well as a large force of ground troops and aircraft.<sup>42</sup> The Kremlin very likely knew that if the installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba was discovered by the United States, it would dramatically increase the chances of an invasion. Evidence of this is provided by a communication transmitted from the Soviet General Staff to the general in charge of Soviet forces in Cuba on September 8, 1962. Signed by both the Chief of the General Staff and the Minister of Defense, the order stated:

---

<sup>40</sup> Desch, “‘That Deep Mud in Cuba,’” 323-324.

<sup>41</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, “*One Hell of a Gamble*”, 186.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 188.

The temporary deployment of Soviet Armed Forces on the Island of Cuba is necessary to insure joint defense against aggression against the USSR and the Republic of Cuba... The task of the Group of Soviet Forces in Cuba is not to permit an enemy landing on Cuban territory from the sea or from the air. The island of Cuba must be turned into an impenetrable fortress.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly the Soviets were concerned that the United States might make a move to invade Cuba, necessitating the deployment of significant military force to augment the Cuban Army. Given that the plans for the deployment of Soviet troops and military hardware were made in conjunction with the deployment of ballistic missiles to Cuba, and not before, it appears that the Soviets understood that the discovery of their action might provoke a severe American response.

The proposal for the Cuban deployment was named Operation *Anadyr* by the Soviets, and in all involved over 50,000 military personnel.<sup>44</sup> Commanded by a General of the Army (equivalent to a four-star general in the U.S. military), the land-based contingent included four regiments of motorized troops, anti-aircraft missile batteries, 33 helicopters, and 73 jet fighters and bombers, as well as numerous support units to handle supply, transport, medical, and other needs.<sup>45</sup>

The heavy commitment of ground and air forces was impressive, but was not matched by a similarly powerful contingent from the Soviet Navy. The naval component of Operation *Anadyr* was composed of 11 submarines (7 of which were ballistic missile carriers), six major surface combatants, a dozen patrol boats, and a handful of anti-ship

---

<sup>43</sup> R. Malinovsky and M. Zakharov to Commander of Group of Soviet Forces in Cuba, memorandum, 8 September 1962, *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=522](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=522).

<sup>44</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 188.

<sup>45</sup> Soviet General Staff, "Diagram of the Organization of the Group of Soviet Forces for 'Anadyr,'" 20 June 1962, *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=102](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=102).

missile batteries for coastal defense.<sup>46</sup> It was a very small force, and was especially insignificant given Cuba's proximity to the United States and its military bases. Given that Cuba is an island, any significant movement of troops and combat gear for an American invasion would have to move by sea. The Soviet Union's intention to fight any attempted invasion meant that a major naval force would be required to defend against any landing, especially since they would literally be fighting in the United States' own backyard. Against such odds, six surface ships, four attack submarines, and a small group of patrol boats and anti-ship missile batteries would have been almost totally useless.

The Soviets must have understood the odds and come to a similar conclusion about the extremely limited impact this small naval detachment could have against any potential invasion. Given the situation, however, it is unlikely that the deployment could have been made much stronger than that which was planned. Khrushchev was finally reaping what he had sown since his rise to power in 1954. The Soviet Navy's surface fleet weakness, directly attributable to Khrushchev's preference for submarines, has already been discussed at length. The attack submarine fleet, though powerful, was still largely reliant on diesel-powered units with relatively limited endurance, a critical factor given Cuba's distance from Soviet bases. Nuclear-powered submarines were slowly coming into the fleet, but in 1962 their technology was still relatively new and untried, and it was considered unsafe to send them all the way to Cuba.<sup>47</sup>

The defense of the Soviet Union itself could also not be neglected in order to free up more surface naval forces for Cuba. Besides the omnipresent threat of aircraft carriers

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Lyle J. Goldstein and Yuri M. Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets: A Russian Perspective on the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean," *Naval War College Review* (Spring 2004), 28.

and amphibious forces that would have to be dealt with in the event of war, there were also the U.S. Navy's ballistic missile submarines to consider. The long range of the American *Poseidon* SLBM meant that Soviet defensive naval patrols had to extend far out to sea in order to have any chance of keeping track of this emerging threat.<sup>48</sup> The larger patrol area of course required more vessels, meaning that fewer would be available at any given time for deployment elsewhere. Still, when questioned by Che Guevara in August 1962 about what the Soviets would do if their missile deployment was discovered, Khrushchev seemed outwardly confident in his plans. "Don't worry, if there is a problem we will send the Baltic fleet," he replied.<sup>49</sup> Khrushchev was either very out of touch with military realities, or, more likely, he understood the situation and was gambling that a strong naval force would not be required for Cuba. As events would later make clear, it was not a good bet for him to make.

### **The Cuban Missile Crisis**

In October 1962 the United States and the Soviet Union suddenly found themselves in a tense confrontation that would become known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The first sign for the United States that something was amiss in Cuba was from one of the more innocuous deployments that was part of Operation *Anadyr*. Aerial reconnaissance of Cuba had discovered that many new surface-to-air missile batteries were being set up on the island, suggesting to American analysts that there was some sort

---

<sup>48</sup> Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," 245.

<sup>49</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1997), 275.



of high-value target present.<sup>50</sup> Knowing that the United States was becoming suspicious, the Kremlin sought to avoid making any moves that might alert the United States to the missile deployments. Khrushchev did not want to unduly alarm the United States, especially before the missile deployments had been completed. In late September, as it became clear that the United States smelled trouble in Cuba, Khrushchev cancelled part of the Operation *Anadyr* plan, including the planned deployment of surface warships.<sup>51</sup> This decision meant that there would be virtually no Soviet naval presence in the Caribbean when the Crisis began to heat up.

By October 16 further missions by U-2 reconnaissance aircraft had confirmed the presence of Soviet IRBMs and MRBMs in Cuba, precipitating the start of the Crisis.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of what the Soviets might have claimed publicly, to American officials the deployment of ballistic missiles to Cuba was a blatantly *offensive*, rather than defensive, move. The deployment of the IRBMs was particularly worrisome because these weapons had enough range to strike American intercontinental missile silos in the Midwest when launched from Cuba.<sup>53</sup> President Kennedy and his advisors quickly came to the conclusion that this state of affairs was intolerable, and that a way had to be found to remove the Soviet missiles as quickly as possible.

During the course of the Crisis, the White House considered several options to get the missiles out of Cuba. A special report made by the Central Intelligence Agency on October 20 examined all possible courses of action including a naval blockade of Cuba, air strikes against the missile sites, and a ground invasion. The report also discussed

---

<sup>50</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 163.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>53</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 230.

possible reactions from the Soviet Union. While not openly advocating any specific course of action, the report did imply that a rapid invasion of Cuba by American ground troops would achieve the goal of ridding Cuba of Soviet missiles while at the same time provoking the smallest possible backlash from the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated an even harsher course of action that would involve air strikes followed by a full blockade coordinated with an invasion.<sup>55</sup>

Despite this hard-line advice, the White House decided that it would be best to adopt a more gradual course of action. The president and cabinet were standing firm on the issue of missile removal, but Kennedy wanted to avoid provoking a war that, he guessed, the Soviets wanted as little as the Americans did. On October 22 it was publicly announced that the U.S. Navy would conduct a “quarantine” of Cuba (the language was used to differentiate the operation from a full blockade) that would prevent the Soviets from delivering any further shipments of offensive weapons to the country.<sup>56</sup> Thus, from the outset, the Cuban Missile Crisis took on a naval character, largely because the United States could dictate the terms of the confrontation.

Khrushchev was not initially impressed or cowed by Kennedy’s actions. He also did not seem to be unduly worried about having to deal with a naval blockade, despite the fact that Soviet military resources for dealing with such a scenario were marginal at best. Gambling again that he could conduct the Cuban deployment without significant naval support, Khrushchev determined that the build-up of missile sites in Cuba should

---

<sup>54</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Special National Intelligence Estimate 11-19-62, ‘Major Consequences of Certain US Courses of Action in Cuba,’” 20 October 1962, 5-10, in Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington, D.C.: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 215-220.

<sup>55</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 186.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 187-188, 193.

continue. Soviet freighters continued to push on toward Cuba after the announcement of the quarantine, as did a small group of submarines.<sup>57</sup> The four submarines were the only remaining naval ships from the group originally slated for deployment to Cuba, and would constitute the Soviet Navy's only presence in the Caribbean during the Crisis. Events would soon prove them to be almost totally useless for the role that they were required to play as events unfolded.

One of the Soviet freighters managed to make port in Cuba before the naval quarantine was fully in place, but the other ships were too far from their intended destinations to beat the deadline. Kennedy did not intend that every Soviet ship that approached Cuba should be stopped and searched, however. The CIA had been ordered to examine the various vessels approaching Cuba as a way to determine their cargoes and their suitability for handling ballistic missiles and their associated hardware.<sup>58</sup> The intent was to stop and search only those vessels whose cargoes were unknown and that appeared to have the capability for carrying offensive weaponry. Besides making the quarantine more efficient, it also limited confrontations that could accidentally provoke a war.

Among the Soviet freighters on course toward Cuba were four that were carrying weapons, including some of the ballistic missiles called for under the Operation *Anadyr* plans.<sup>59</sup> Though Khrushchev initially seemed dismissive of Kennedy's action, by October 23 he appeared to have second thoughts about challenging the naval quarantine, at least with the freighters. He was particularly concerned that if the U.S. Navy stopped one of the ships carrying weapons, it would seize the cargo, thus exposing sensitive

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 196; Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 247.

<sup>58</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 196.

<sup>59</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 247.

military secrets to the United States.<sup>60</sup> Khrushchev had no way, short of dangerously escalating the confrontation, with which he could physically prevent the freighters from being stopped and boarded. Under normal circumstances, a Soviet destroyer or cruiser might have escorted the freighters to deter American efforts to stop them. As previously stated, however, there were no such vessels available in the area. The lack of a surface warship presence in the region was definitely making itself felt, though it is unclear if Khrushchev actually understood the situation in these terms. In the end, the United States, confident that most of the military cargoes had been diverted from Cuba, only boarded and searched one ship, while allowing a small number of others to proceed through the quarantine to give Khrushchev the chance to save face.<sup>61</sup>

It was a humiliating moment for the Soviet Union, showing that one of the world's great superpowers could not even guarantee freedom of navigation for its merchant ships, but there was worse yet to come. Even more embarrassing than the freighter debacle was the fate of the four diesel attack submarines that had also been destined for Cuba. Though it seems possible that four vessels traveling underwater would have had a good chance of sneaking through the quarantine, the reality was that there was little chance for them against the full weight of the U.S. Navy. While the submarines were very quiet while running on batteries, they periodically had to run on or near the surface to recharge their batteries in a noisy process called snorkeling. Because of this, American military aircraft and underwater sonar installations were able to track the submarines for much of their journey across the Atlantic toward Cuba. Eventually,

---

<sup>60</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 197.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 198-200.

three returned to the Soviet Union after being forced to the surface by American warships, while the fourth was recalled later, without ever making port in Cuba.<sup>62</sup>

Khrushchev must have realized that he could not force the issue due to the Soviet Union's weak military position in the Caribbean, and in any case did he not want to antagonize the United States any further given the tense situation. By October 28, back channel negotiation had defused the situation, and on that day the Soviet leader publicly announced his intention to withdraw his country's nuclear missiles from Cuba.<sup>63</sup> Though peace had been fortunately preserved, the whole effort to place missiles in Cuba had been a colossal failure.

Neither of the Kremlin's two main goals had been realized. Fidel Castro's regime had not been satisfied of the Soviet Union's supposed intent to protect it from a hostile United States. Castro, who apparently had not understood how weak the Soviet Union's position was from the very beginning, was angered by Khrushchev's decision to remove the missiles precisely because he felt that it left Cuba extremely vulnerable.<sup>64</sup> The Soviet bid to strengthen and reassure their Caribbean ally achieved only frustration and a sense of betrayal.

More importantly, the Soviet Union's strategic situation was no better than it had been before the attempt to place nuclear weapons in Cuba. There were no ballistic missile launchers to counter the American ICBM advantage, and no submarine base had been built to allow Soviet missile submarines easy access to patrol zones off the coast of the United States. As part of the negotiations that ended the Crisis the Soviet Union had managed to persuade the United States to remove a group of MRBMs deployed in

---

<sup>62</sup> Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 28.

<sup>63</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 283-288.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 288.

Turkey, but given the rest of the nuclear balance sheet these weapons held relatively little strategic importance. Thus, the Soviet Union was no safer from a nuclear first strike than it had been before.

### **Soviet Naval Presence during the Missile Crisis: History and Possibility**

No one person or action can be said to have caused the Soviet Union's failure in Cuba, but it does seem clear that Khrushchev's policy toward the Soviet Navy in the years preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis was a determining factor. Given that Cuba could not effectively be supported without naval strength, Khrushchev's defense policies played a direct part in weakening the Soviet Caribbean position and limiting options during the Crisis. Washington was well aware of the Soviet naval weakness in the Caribbean, probably one reason Kennedy opted to make his response to the Soviet missiles a naval one.<sup>65</sup> How could the Soviets hope to oppose the American plan to stop and search their ships without effective escort? Only surface warships could provide such an escort, and there were none present during the Crisis. Even if the naval portion of Operation *Anadyr* had been completed as planned, it is doubtful as to whether or not six surface warships could have made a major impact on the outcome, given the strength of the U.S. Navy in the Caribbean and the fact that there were some thirty ships for the Soviets to protect.<sup>66</sup> The weak force of submarines that was available failed to deter the Americans from taking action against Soviet ships going to Cuba, and might just as well not have been present at all.

---

<sup>65</sup> Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 189.

<sup>66</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 247.

In addition to the realities of the Cuban Missile Crisis, there are also the theoretical failings to take into account. As has already been discussed, there were hard-line elements in Washington who advocated a more direct course of action than naval quarantine. The Joint Chiefs of Staff favored an invasion of the island, and the CIA spoke favorably of the idea as well, believing it would minimize the severity of the Soviet response. The orders that the Commander of Soviet Armed Forces in Cuba received specifically stating that he was to resist any invasion attempt have also been mentioned, and provide evidence that the Soviet Union would not have sat idly by if an invasion had actually taken place. The Soviet naval presence in the Caribbean would have been on the front lines of any such defense. Even if the full Operation *Anadyr* deployment had been carried out, the Soviet naval presence would have been heavily outnumbered by the invading force. American plans drawn up for the possibility an invasion would be ordered called for a massive force of 183 ships, including eight aircraft carriers, which would easily have swept aside the comparatively tiny force called for in *Anadyr*. The Soviet Navy clearly was unprepared for the invasion scenario, and given the distances involved and force limitations mentioned earlier, it was probably impossible for the naval force near Cuba to be reinforced to the extent that it could effectively contest such an event. Thus, this theoretical situation can also be counted against Khrushchev's naval policy.

The only way that the Soviet naval force sent to Cuba might have had an impact favorable to the Soviet Union would have been through the use of nuclear weapons. The naval contingent was supplied with such devices, the anti-ship missile batteries having nuclear warheads for their missiles and the four attack submarines carrying one nuclear

torpedo apiece.<sup>67</sup> In the event of an invasion by the United States for example, the use of these weapons could have caused significant losses among the attacking naval forces. Khrushchev's willingness to make concessions to Kennedy in an effort to relieve mounting tensions during the Crisis indicates that nuclear weapon usage was unlikely, however. If the Soviet leader was so willing to give in, it is doubtful that he would have authorized the use of nuclear weapons at sea, even in the event of an American invasion. The exception to this would have been in response to nuclear weapons being used by the United States first, but this seems to have been equally unlikely.

The events of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the subsequent humiliation of the Soviet Union put a glaring spotlight on Khrushchev's policies and cast an unfavorable shadow over him. His failure in this endeavor helped to make him vulnerable to the bloodless coup that unseated him in 1964 and installed Leonid Brezhnev in his place. In particular, the shortsightedness of Khrushchev's defense planning must have been made brilliantly clear to the Soviet military and political leadership. During Khrushchev's tenure as leader, the country's entire defense apparatus, including the Navy, had been built around the premise that it should rely on nuclear weapons to deter or destroy any aggression against the Soviet Union. It was a policy designed in response to the dual concerns of financial pressure and American military strengths. Khrushchev's thinking is perhaps understandable, but unfortunately it failed to take into account all the requirements of conventional military operations, or, for that matter, non-war situations in which military power could be used as a deterrent to certain actions or for political leverage. In essence, these policies created a military, and especially a Navy, that was

---

<sup>67</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble"*, 247; Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 28.



good for the limited situations for which it was designed, but that was totally out of its depth when asked to do something else.

The Soviets quickly realized that changes needed to be made if they were to make a better showing in future confrontations with the United States. Failures to support strategic goals and the needs of client states could not be shrugged off because the Soviet Union could not hope to maintain its own safety and international standing otherwise. Though the Soviet Navy was clearly the service that was most responsible for the failure in Cuba, it is likely that the service as a whole was not held to be at fault. There is no specific evidence to this effect, but by the 1960s the Navy had been fighting for many years to improve its capabilities and gain the new equipment that it needed. Admiral Kuznetsov had even sacrificed his position as Commander-in-Chief in order to oppose the defense initiatives from Khrushchev that he believed undermined his service's true potential. Perhaps if the Soviet Navy had been better equipped for the situation the outcome might have been different. With a new man heading the country and the memories of Cuba still fresh in many minds, it was the ideal time to propose changes and reforms of Soviet naval policy and thinking to the political leadership, and in Admiral Sergei Gorshkov the Soviet Navy had an excellent man to champion its cause. Gorshkov was in good standing with the political leadership due to the fact that he had refrained from making too many waves during Khrushchev's time. Now he could use Cuba as justification for addressing the Navy's shortfalls, and perhaps even exploit the momentum to convince his political masters to strengthen Soviet sea power.

## **The Soviet Navy after the Cuban Missile Crisis**

### **Post-Crisis Analysis and Changes**

The outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis represented a policy failure of the highest order for the Soviet Union. Soviet military and political leaders understood what had been at stake, and also the strategic opportunity that had been lost to them. They may have publicly tried to put a brave face on the Cuban debacle, but internally no time was lost in determining why the missile deployment had turned into such a misadventure.

It was immediately apparent that the Soviet Navy had been totally unprepared to support the Soviet Union's attempt to use Cuba as a strategic missile base. Soviet leaders saw that the Navy's short-range, submarine-heavy force had been inadequate for protecting the long and vulnerable line of communication between Cuba and the Soviet Union. It would have been only slightly less impotent had the Americans decided to invade Cuba rather than simply conducting a blockade operation. A senior member of Khrushchev's government, Anastas Mikoyan, admitted as much during a meeting with Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders on November 4, 1962. Because of the great distance separating Cuba and its powerful patron, Mikoyan stated, the Soviet Union had been forced to rely on diplomatic pressure and political maneuvering to respond to the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>68</sup> While such tools were certainly useful in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, their influence could only go so far. The Cuban

---

<sup>68</sup> V. Tikhmenev, "Memorandum of Conversation of A.I. Mikoyan with Fidel Castro, Oswaldo Dorticos Torrado, Raul Castro, Ernesto Guevara, Emilio Aragones and Carlos Rafael Rodriguez. (4 Nov. 1962)", *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=32](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=32).

Missile Crisis had demonstrated to the Soviet government that when the strategic nuclear balance was at stake, stronger tools of persuasion were absolutely necessary to back up their position.

The fact that Soviet political leaders of the time had to learn this lesson in the tough school of superpower conflict highlighted a key flaw in Khrushchev's defense policy. The nuclear age had not diminished the role of naval power. Navies were still important, and arguably had developed an even greater role in peace than they would ever have in wartime. Especially when dealing with a strong maritime power like the United States, the Soviet Union could not afford to economize on its defense spending by limiting the Navy to a strictly defensive role. A balanced force capable of operating at significant distances from the Soviet Union itself had to be built, regardless of the cost. Not doing so could only lead to further policy disappointments in the future.

Recognition within the Soviet government of the need for balanced, long-range naval power did not produce immediate changes in the Soviet Navy's structure. It did, however, generate an atmosphere in the Kremlin that was more receptive to suggestions of reform. An article published in the July 1963 issue of *Morskoi Sbornik*, the professional journal of the Soviet Navy reflected the change in attitude. The article's author was none other than the previously docile Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Sergei G. Gorshkov. In the piece, Gorshkov implicitly criticized the submarine-oriented structure of the Navy by openly arguing for a balanced force that utilized more surface warships.<sup>69</sup> Gorshkov's conclusions about the utility of surface warships and criticisms of the Navy's structure went against what had been Khrushchev's personal beliefs about military policy, and ignored the fact a previous C-in-C of the

---

<sup>69</sup> Hibbits, "Admiral Gorshkov: Architect of the Soviet Navy," 145.

Navy, Admiral Kuznetsov, had been relieved of his post for open opposition. That Gorshkov was able to make public, critical statements about naval policy in 1963 is proof of how well the Soviet leadership was beginning to understand their country's naval weakness after the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In fact, not only did Gorshkov's status not decline after publication of his 1963 article, but it actually increased. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s Gorshkov became more prominent and influential. He was publicly praised by the Communist Party, the press, and other leading military figures, and in 1967 was promoted to Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union (equivalent to a five-star flag officer in the American military).<sup>70</sup> These developments are indicative of the respect and esteem that Gorshkov received from the Soviet leadership, and also mark the gains in power and influence he made as his career continued. Gorshkov's growing prestige put him in an excellent position to shape naval policy at a critical time for his country. With the Kremlin still smarting from its reverse in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and with the reins of power having passed from Khrushchev to Brezhnev, the Soviet Union was ready to restructure its fleet. Gorshkov, of course, was more than willing to provide a blueprint for such changes.

The ultimate example of Gorshkov's influence among Soviet leaders appeared in the form of a series of eleven articles written for *Morskoi Sbornik* between 1972 and 1973. Titling the series "Navies in War and Peace," Gorshkov used analysis of historical events to contend that the Soviet Union required a strong, balanced naval fleet to support its political objectives around the world. He argued throughout the series that naval power was critical for supporting the extension of Soviet influence abroad, and that naval weakness would give an advantage to any potential enemy of the Soviet Union, both in

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

peace and in war.<sup>71</sup> These ideas would be refined and presented in a more formal format in 1976 with the publication of Gorshkov's book *The Sea Power of the State*. Nowhere in his articles or the book did Gorshkov specifically refer to the failures of the Cuban Missile Crisis to give weight to his statements, but the similarities of his historical examples with the events of the early 1960s were very likely apparent to his intended audience.

These writings were not the actual impetus for the restructuring of the Soviet Navy, however. As will be seen later, the reform process had already begun by the late 1960s. In all likelihood, the articles and book were actually the public announcement of a policy that Gorshkov had been advocating to the Kremlin for several years, once it was apparent that the Soviet government had become more receptive to calls for a change in naval policy. The articles do, however, reveal just how much the Soviet Navy's status had risen in the hierarchy of defense policy. No longer relegated to the role of nuclear sentry for the Soviet Union's territory, by the 1970s the Navy's mission had expanded enough to make it a primary tool and symbol of Soviet power around the world. As priorities changed in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, so too did the Soviet Navy's structure.

### **From Theory to Practice: The Fleet Changes**

While Gorshkov was laboring to improve the Soviet Navy's fortunes through reasoned argument, he was simultaneously working to move the fleet away from its

---

<sup>71</sup> Michael MccGwire, "The Evolution of Soviet Naval Policy: 1960-74," in *Soviet Naval Policy: Objectives and Constraints*, ed. Michael MccGwire, Ken Booth, and John McDonnell, 537 (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1975).

reliance on submarines and toward a more balanced fleet. The problems evident in the Navy's structure during the Crisis itself were addressed as fully as possible in the new string of ship classes that were introduced starting in the late 1960s and continuing up until the end of the Cold War.

The primary threat to the Soviet Navy during the Cuban Missile Crisis had been an aerial one. U.S. naval aircraft were able to freely track and harass Soviet submarines traveling to Cuba during the Crisis. Additionally, in a scenario that could have led to an outbreak of war in the Caribbean, any naval force, surface or otherwise, would more than likely have been completely destroyed by the large numbers of American strike aircraft in the theater. The Soviets realized that to create an effective naval presence, a protective air umbrella was required for the fleet. To a certain extent, such an umbrella already existed. The Soviet Navy had its own air arm, separate from the Soviet Air Force, complete with fighters, bombers, helicopters, and specialized patrol and reconnaissance aircraft. Its effectiveness was handicapped, however, by the fact that nearly all of its aircraft were based on land.<sup>72</sup> Ships operating far from the coasts of the Soviet Union, like the submarines crossing the Atlantic Ocean on their way to Cuba, could not be supported by Soviet naval aviation.

The solution to this problem was to follow the American lead and build aircraft carriers, allowing the aerial shield to travel with the fleet. Initially, Admiral Gorshkov hoped that these carriers would be large, nuclear-powered vessels capable of fielding dozens of planes, like their counterparts in the U.S. Navy.<sup>73</sup> These plans were overly ambitious though, especially given the fact that the Soviet Union had never even operated

---

<sup>72</sup> Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," 238.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 246.

such a large warship, much less constructed one. Eventually, a smaller design capable of carrying approximately 36 aircraft was settled on.<sup>74</sup> The time from the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis to the authorization for work to begin on an aircraft carrier project was relatively short. Design work on the class, named *Kiev*, was begun in 1967, and the first ship of an eventual group of four was placed in service in 1975.<sup>75</sup>

While the *Kievs* were nowhere near as large or as powerful as American aircraft carriers, they were a significant step forward in capability for the Soviet Navy. Besides providing protection from air attack in remote areas, the aircraft carried by these ships provided the Soviet fleet with a significant offensive capability it had not previously possessed. Beyond this, the *Kievs* carried large numbers of anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles for their own protection, a feature that American carriers lacked.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the addition of these aircraft carriers to the Soviet fleet not only redressed the Navy's aerial weakness, but also represented a major increase in the fleet's combat power and caused serious concern in the United States and other NATO countries.<sup>77</sup>

The building of aircraft carriers was probably the most important aspect of the naval restructuring efforts, but it was far from being the largest program. The lack of significant numbers of quality surface warships posed a great dilemma for the Soviet Navy. In the 1960s, the Navy had no aircraft carriers, and even after the construction program begun in 1967 it could only muster four such vessels. This meant that much of the fleet's general strength rested in its major surface combatants. By this measure of strength, however, the Soviet Navy as it existed during the Cuban Missile Crisis was

---

<sup>74</sup> Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia*, 92.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>77</sup> Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," 248.

relatively weak. In 1962 the most powerful surface warships available to the Navy were an obsolescent class of light cruisers. These ships were relatively modern, the last having been completed in 1955, but they lacked any sort of missile armament, either defensive or offensive, making them vulnerable to air attack.<sup>78</sup>

Large numbers of modern ships were required to give the Soviet surface fleet the strength it required to be an effective military instrument. As with the carriers, the time elapsed between the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the implementation of new naval construction programs was minimal. By 1968, no fewer than three classes of missile cruisers and one class of missile destroyers were under construction in Soviet yards, and eventually these four classes would total 41 ships in all.<sup>79</sup> Even more modern and powerful ships were in the planning stages. This sort of effort showed a real commitment on the part of the Soviet Union to improve the Navy's surface combat capabilities.

As with the *Kiev*-class aircraft carrier program, surface ship construction would eventually go beyond simply addressing the Soviet Navy's noticeable shortfalls. By 1974 dozens of new major surface warships had been commissioned into the fleet, making good the quantitative and qualitative shortfalls that had become evident during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In that same year, however, the Soviet Navy began construction work on a new class of surface warship that would become the crowning achievement of the Soviet Union's rebuilt naval force. The ship class, named *Kirov*, boasted nuclear propulsion and a heavy armament, including 20 heavy anti-ship missiles and well over 100 anti-aircraft missiles, along with a large array of various other

---

<sup>78</sup> Pavlov, *Warships of the USSR and Russia*, 101.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 105-116.



weapons.<sup>80</sup> Excluding aircraft carriers, the *Kirovs* were the largest surface warships built by any country since World War II, and arguably the most powerful as well.<sup>81</sup> There was likely a similar reaction to the first appearance of a *Kirov* in 1980 as that of the *Kievs* not long before. These massive warships were a sign that the Soviet Navy, especially the surface fleet, had overcome its impotence of 1962. The concept of a balanced fleet had been seized upon and, thanks to the tireless efforts of Admiral Gorshkov, realized through the construction of increasingly large and powerful classes of surface combatants. Events in the years following the Cuban Missile Crisis would quickly serve to vindicate the money and effort that had been poured into the creation of this revamped fleet.

The trends of numerical expansion and qualitative improvement were quickly noticed by naval officers in the United States. The change in the Soviet Navy after the Cuban Missile Crisis was unmistakable, and caused much concern among military professionals. Gorshkov's writings were quickly translated and published in the United States. In one such translation, published in 1974, Admiral Zumwalt reviewed the numerous new Soviet ship classes that were becoming operational and how they were improving the Soviet Navy's strength. He concluded, "In the future we can anticipate that wherever ships of the U.S. Navy operate we will see modern, highly capable, and sea-wise units of the Soviet fleet juxtaposed to our presence," and also predicting that the use of this new naval capability would give the Soviet Union "great leverage" to use against the United States.<sup>82</sup> Zumwalt's worries about the expanding Soviet Navy were

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 95-96.

<sup>81</sup> Lovett, "The Soviet Cold War Navy," 248.

<sup>82</sup> Elmo R. Zumwalt, "Conclusion," in *Red Star Rising at Sea* (see note 23), 140-141.

justified, given how Soviet sea power was participating in the events that were playing out on the international scene.

### **The Effects of Change**

The Soviet Navy as it existed in 1980 was a very different force than it had been just 20 years earlier. Perhaps the best indication of just how much had changed can be seen in the evaluations of the Soviet fleet created by the United States military and intelligence communities. In 1982, for example, the Central Intelligence Agency published a classified report examining the evolution of the Soviet Navy between 1964 and 1980. The same report also attempted to predict developments that would occur in the future up to 1985. The results of the study were nothing short of amazing. In 16 years the Soviet Navy had added 71 major surface combatants to its ranks, increased the average displacement of its surface fleet from 4,900 to 6,300 tons, and made rapid technological advances.<sup>83</sup> The CIA also used the standard of “inventory value” as a means of measuring naval development, a measurement that considered the estimated monetary cost of the vessels in the Soviet inventory. Not surprisingly, in the CIA’s judgment the inventory value of the Soviet Navy’s surface fleet had doubled in the period under study, indicating that spending on surface ships had also increased dramatically.<sup>84</sup>

Overall, the CIA’s analysis showed that massive effort had been put into surface ship construction up to 1980, and the results had not been disappointing for the Soviet

---

<sup>83</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “U.S. and Soviet Major Surface Warships, 1964-1985: The Perspective of Inventory Value,” April 1982, 2, in *CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Union, 1947-1991*, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

Union. By 1980 Soviet surface ships were more numerous, significantly bigger, and far more advanced than they had been in 1964. A larger fleet meant that more ships were available in any given theater of operations, giving the Soviet Union the option of applying political and military leverage in any area with ocean access. Greater displacement and technological sophistication gave the Navy's ships the ability to carry more weapons and travel greater distances than ever before. It also meant that Soviet surface ships were at least equal and sometimes more powerful than their counterparts in NATO navies. In short, the Soviet Navy had been fashioned into a powerful military tool, exactly as Admiral Gorshkov had hoped for when he first began his crusade for the fleet in 1963.

The numbers are only one part of the story, however. The real measure of how the Soviet Navy had changed was visible in the numerous incidents the fleet participated in after the Cuban Missile Crisis. In episodes ranging from regional conflicts to superpower confrontations, the Soviet Navy began to travel greater and greater distances from its native waters. Unlike the debacle in the waters around Cuba, these incidents witnessed the Soviet Union successfully applying diplomatic and political pressures through the use of naval power. The Navy's developing combat power in turn made the fleet an excellent implement to support Soviet interests abroad.

A small but important historical event that exemplified the Soviet Navy's growing usefulness to the state took place near the end of the 1960s. In October of 1968, two Soviet fishing trawlers were seized by the African country of Ghana for allegedly entering territorial waters without permission.<sup>85</sup> To the Soviets, this was a very serious matter that demanded a tough response. Much of the Soviet concern arose from the fact

---

<sup>85</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 520.

that the ships taken by Ghana were fishing vessels. Oceanic fishing was a major source of food for the Soviet Union, and Admiral Gorshkov even used the protection of Soviet fishing rights and fleets as a primary justification for the need for greater naval power.<sup>86</sup>

Like the threat from American nuclear weapons, challenges to Soviet access to basic resources were still urgent and could not be ignored. The incident arising over Ghana's seizure of the fishing trawlers had to be settled in favor of the Soviet Union. After a period of unsuccessfully trying to resolve the situation with diplomatic and political pressures, two missile destroyers, a submarine, and a support ship were dispatched to Ghana in February 1969, along with a public warning of "possible consequences" if the Soviet demands for release of the trawlers and their crews were not met.<sup>87</sup> It was a powerful signal, not least because the small Soviet flotilla was probably more powerful than the entirety of Ghana's naval forces. Faced with Soviet warships off their coast, in March of 1969 the Ghanaian government released the trawlers and most of the crewmen.<sup>88</sup>

The Ghana incident was, however, a mediocre success for the Soviet Navy at best. Even after the dispatch of Soviet warships to the region, a month passed before Soviet demands were completely satisfied. The flotilla probably had some minor impact on Ghana's actions, but it was the perception of success through gunboat diplomacy that was really important. American Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, who became Chief of Naval Operations not long after the events in Ghana and was a careful observer of the Soviet Navy, certainly believed that the employment of a Soviet naval squadron had made the

---

<sup>86</sup> Gorshkov, *Sea Power of the State*, 42-46.

<sup>87</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 527-529.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 531.

Ghanaians give in.<sup>89</sup> The Soviets probably took a similar view of the incident's outcome, and were likely all the more pleased because the vessels sent to Ghana were the first units of the Soviet Navy ever to visit the waters off the west coast of Africa.<sup>90</sup> Though in geopolitical terms the incident was relatively minor, the Soviet response foreshadowed grander and more frequent use of the Navy as an instrument of policy.

The Ghana operation, along with other deployments, also showed that the reach of that arm was growing longer with every passing year. 1969 would see the Soviet Navy make 68 foreign port visits and deployments, nearly double the number of the year before, and almost four times as many as in 1967.<sup>91</sup> In Africa, the increase in naval activity was especially evident. Only two years after the conclusion of the Ghana affair, the Soviet Navy had established a permanent presence in African waters. In 1971 the port of Conakry in Guinea-Bissau became home to a Soviet destroyer, oiler, and amphibious landing ship, and simultaneously developed into a waypoint for patrolling Soviet submarines.<sup>92</sup> After Ghana, an enduring presence in the region was viewed as necessary for the protection of Soviet interests. The developing strength of the Navy allowed the Soviet Union to exert influence over and pressure on African nations, whether client states or otherwise.

While the developments in Africa were an important indication of the Navy's growth, they were only one small step in the development of Soviet maritime strength. Exercising influence over militarily weak African countries was one thing. Upholding Soviet interests in the face of more powerful opposition was quite another. Despite the

---

<sup>89</sup> Elmo R. Zumwalt, *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), 332.

<sup>90</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 519.

<sup>91</sup> Michael McCwire, "Foreign-Port Visits by Soviet Naval Units," in *Soviet Naval Policy: Objectives and Constraints* (see note 71), 387-418.

<sup>92</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 555-556.

Soviet Navy's continuing improvement, it had yet to prove itself capable of successfully confronting its principal adversary, the United States Navy. The ability to stand up to the United States at sea was, after all, the whole goal of the Soviet Navy's development program. Besides showing that the Soviet Union could protect its interests in the face of the strongest enemy, it would also show the world that the United States was no longer the unchallenged master of the world's oceans.

It was not long before Cold War international politics obligingly provided the Soviet Navy with an opportunity to test its newfound strength on a worthy foe. In October of 1973, the Yom Kippur War broke out in the Middle East. Egypt and Syria, provided with support and backing from Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, launched full-scale military assaults on Israel. Though only Middle Eastern powers actually engaged in combat, both the United States and the Soviet Union were drawn into the conflict through the necessity of supporting their regional allies. Egypt and Syria were both client states of the Soviet Union, while Israel in turn received major support from the United States. As war raged in both the north and south of Israel, the U.S. and Soviet navies jockeyed for position as each side made sure that the other would not actively go to the aid of its allies.

The Yom Kippur War pitted the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet against the Soviet Navy's Fifth *Eska**dra* or squadron, a branch of the Black Sea Fleet. Up until 1967, the Sixth Fleet had dominated the Mediterranean Sea, while Soviet naval power in the region was very weak.<sup>93</sup> Six years later, however, the Soviet strength had been augmented to the point that it was able to challenge the Sixth Fleet for dominance of the Mediterranean. By 1973 the Fifth *Eska**dra* consisted of 52 ships, including 14 major surface combatants

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 441.

(several of which carried anti-ship missiles) and 11 submarines.<sup>94</sup> This increase in strength gave the Fifth *Eskadra* considerable combat power, and likely caused concern among American naval officers in the Mediterranean. The Soviet fleet's local combat power was about equal to that of the Sixth Fleet, which could muster 48 ships, among them two aircraft carriers and an amphibious group carrying 3,000 U.S. Marines.<sup>95</sup>

The Soviet Union and United States played their indirect roles in the Yom Kippur War almost from the very start of the fighting. The furious pace and lethal character of the ground combat was fueled by massive consumption of munitions and equipment on both sides. Not long after the start of the war, the Soviet Union began to ship weapons to both Egypt and Syria using aircraft and merchant ships.<sup>96</sup> Due to concerns about the safety of the transport ships, a heavy escort was formed to protect the merchant vessels during their journey. A group of ten destroyers from the Black Sea Fleet was given the task of escorting the resupply effort.<sup>97</sup> The Soviets likely worried that the Israelis would view the delivery of war materiel to Syria and Egypt as a hostile act and try to sink the transports. Their concerns about Israeli belligerency were only heightened when an Israeli air raid on the port of Tartus, Syria accidentally sank a Soviet merchant ship (which had been moored there before the resupply effort began) as well as two Syrian warships.<sup>98</sup> It is probable that the Soviets also wanted to guard against the possibility of the U.S. Navy attempting to prevent fresh equipment and supplies from reaching the Arab combatants.

---

<sup>94</sup> Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 39.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>96</sup> Richard O. Freeman, "The Soviet Union and Sadat's Egypt," in *Soviet Naval Policy: Objectives and Constraints* (see note 71), 226; Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 41.

<sup>97</sup> Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 41.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 42.

In addition to protecting the Soviet Union's logistical lifeline to Egypt and Syria, the Fifth *Eskadra* also maintained close surveillance of major American warships. The U.S. Navy's aircraft carriers received especially close attention from Soviet vessels. Soviet surface ships trailed the American aircraft carriers wherever they went.<sup>99</sup> Besides providing intelligence on the location of these valuable units, the Soviet "escorts" could unleash an instant and deadly attack with their anti-ship missiles if the situation required. While the attacking Soviet ships would, in turn, most likely be destroyed by the American warships escorting the carrier, the prospect of being able to score even a "mission kill" on an aircraft carrier was worth the sacrifice.<sup>100</sup>

The Soviet Navy also carefully monitored the Sixth Fleet's U.S. Marine amphibious group. During the first few days of the Yom Kippur War, Egypt and Syria managed to inflict serious defeats on the Israelis. In the event that Israel was on the verge of defeat, Moscow wanted to guard against the possibility of direct military intervention by the United States. The ships watching the amphibious group were meant to convey this message to Washington in no uncertain terms.<sup>101</sup>

Changing fortunes in the war caused this tough stance to become irrelevant, however. Israeli forces soon regained the initiative and counterattacked on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. Just over two weeks after the war started, the Israelis had driven the Syrians out of northern Israel and had also managed to advance into Egyptian

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>100</sup> The terms "hard kill" and "mission kill" describe different ways of putting warships out of action. In a "hard kill", a ship is damaged badly enough that it sinks. In contrast, a "mission kill" simply damages a ship badly enough that it cannot carry out its intended function without major repairs. For an aircraft carrier, this generally involves damaging the flight deck and related equipment, thereby preventing the ship from conducting flight operations. Because aircraft carriers are large vessels, it is theoretically easier to achieve a "mission kill" by badly damaging the flight deck than it is to score a "hard kill" by sinking the entire vessel.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



territory.<sup>102</sup> At this point, the United States and the Soviet Union were eager for the war to end. Both countries submitted a ceasefire resolution to the United Nations, which was approved by the Security Council but ignored by warring parties, who still wished to improve their positions before peace came.<sup>103</sup>

Unfortunately for Egypt and the Soviet Union, the Israelis continued to prevail in combat. As the Egyptians lost more and more ground, the Soviets faced the possibility that their client state might be completely defeated by the Israeli onslaught. Alarmed, the Kremlin took immediate action to prevent such an outcome. One day after the failed ceasefire resolution was adopted by the U.N. Security Council, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev sent a message to American President Richard Nixon saying that immediate action had to be taken to halt the Israeli advance.<sup>104</sup> Brezhnev used naval power to back up his message. On the same day that the communiqué was transmitted, three Soviet missile destroyers and three amphibious ships carrying Naval Infantry troops (the Soviet equivalent of the Marines) sailed for Port Said in Egypt.<sup>105</sup> The Soviets did not intend to let the Egyptians be defeated, and, ironically, threatened to intervene in the same way that they had sought to prevent the United States from doing only a week earlier. Washington took the Soviet message seriously, and managed to halt the Israeli advance by applying heavy diplomatic pressure.<sup>106</sup>

In the final analysis, the Yom Kippur War was a resounding success for the Soviet Navy. Despite the presence of a powerful American naval force, which was augmented at the end of the conflict with a third U.S. Navy carrier group, the Soviet

---

<sup>102</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 454.

<sup>103</sup> Freeman, "The Soviet Union and Sadat's Egypt," 227.

<sup>104</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 455.

<sup>105</sup> Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 46.

<sup>106</sup> Kaplan and others, *Diplomacy of Power*, 456.

Navy upheld Soviet interests. Military supplies were sealifted to Syria and Egypt without interference from the United States, and at the same time Soviet naval strength (up to 88 ships by the end of the war) served to dampen any thoughts the United States might have entertained about direct military intervention.<sup>107</sup> Even more impressive was the Soviet Union's ability to protect the security its ally, Egypt, by threatening direct intervention unless the United States acted to rein in the Israelis.

What is less certain is what might have happened if the Yom Kippur War had somehow brought the Sixth Fleet and Fifth *Eskadra* to blows with each other. With significant amounts of both Soviet and American naval power in the region, it is difficult to say which side, if any, would have gained the upper hand in such a contest. However, it is safe to say that any combat in the Mediterranean in 1973 would not have been a one-sided affair. It undoubtedly would have caused heavy losses to both the Soviet and American fleets. The Soviet Navy would have done better in the Yom Kippur affair than it would have if the Cuban Missile Crisis had degenerated into a shooting war.

In short, the events of 1973 showed that the Soviet Navy had overcome many of the weaknesses that had plagued it in 1962. The increase in the number and quality of surface ships had allowed the Fifth *Eskadra* to protect supply lines, threaten three U.S. Navy carrier groups, and guard against the possibility of direct American intervention all at the same time. The Soviet Navy had proven itself capable of protecting its country's interests during a major international crisis, even when faced by powerful opposition. Moreover, the Navy was still growing and developing. Some of the most advanced units of the post-Missile Crisis reforms, notably the *Kiev*-class aircraft carriers and *Kirov*-class missile cruisers, had yet to join the fleet. With the Soviet Navy still growing and

---

<sup>107</sup> Goldstein and Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets," 46-47.

evolving, Soviet leaders must have been reassured that they would be able to deal effectively with future international overseas crises.

## **Conclusion**

The great change in the Soviet Navy has been well documented in previous pages. Evidence of the massive overhaul to which the Soviet fleet was subjected is adequately provided by a glance at the number and types of surface ships that were added to the fleet after 1962. In a few short years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, several new building programs were already adding high-quality surface combatants to the Navy's arsenal. As the Cold War continued through the 1970s and 1980s, this naval construction effort produced ever-more powerful surface warships, and even a small group of aircraft carriers, that significantly upgraded the Soviet Navy's capability to operate far from home and provide a worthy challenge to American sea power wherever it went.

Similarly, the great leap forward in Soviet naval capability that began during the 1960s is documented in the changed attitudes of American naval officers from the beginning of the Cold War up through the 1970s. Admiral Sherman's dismissive attitude toward the strength of the Soviet Navy of the late 1940s was mentioned at the very beginning of this paper. By contrast, in the 1970s Admiral Zumwalt was highly concerned about the threat posed to American naval dominance by the Soviet Navy's new muscles. The successful uses and promotion of Soviet naval power during the late 1960s and early 1970s had shown the Soviet Navy was becoming a force to be reckoned with, and would continue to be so well into the future.

The change from the weak, short-ranged force that existed just after World War II to the first-rate fleet that reached into all the world's oceans in the 1980s had not been a very gradual one. Relatively little naval development had occurred before the Cuban

Missile Crisis. The years after 1962 saw the Soviet belief in military economization and nuclear security quickly fall apart in the face of the allotment of funding for dozens of new warships. Only 11 years later the Soviet fleet successfully stood eye-to-eye with the U.S. Navy in a tense Mediterranean confrontation. This was in stark contrast to miserable naval effort that the Soviet Union had managed to muster to defend Cuba and Soviet shipping during the Missile Crisis.

Over a decade after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the renowned American Admiral Arleigh Burke summed up the development of the Soviet Navy in the post-World War II era. He recounted the abortive development process that bridged Stalin's and Khrushchev's time in power, along the way implicitly praised the Soviet Union's utilization of nuclear power and guided missiles for their fleet. He then went on to state:

Technically, [the Soviets] were doing pretty well, but it was not until the missile crises [sic] in 1962 that they fully comprehended what it took to control the sea, or to deny its use to the enemy. From that experience, they learned... [the] important element of having ships that could perform their tasks wherever those tasks had to be performed. By 1966 it was apparent that the Soviets were starting to operate on the high seas, and now, today, it is apparent that they are trying to build ships, aircraft, and equipment that can be effective in war and influential in peace.<sup>108</sup>

Burke, then, understood that the Cuban Missile Crisis was the key event in the reinvention of the Soviet Navy. Due to the weaknesses of Khrushchev's naval policy, the Soviet Union had been unprepared for a non-nuclear war confrontation with the United States far from its home territory. The Soviet Navy's fleet, dominated by submarines, did not send an adequately strong message to the United States about the seriousness of Soviet intentions during the Crisis. Nor could the Soviet fleet have had any chance of defending Cuba against an all-out American blockade (as opposed to the selective quarantine that was actually implemented), or an invasion by American ground troops if

---

<sup>108</sup> Arleigh Burke, "Commentary," in *Red Star Rising at Sea* (see note 23), 97.

the situation had escalated to that point. Without naval power, the Soviet Union was unable to defend its position in Cuba. Without Cuba, there was no chance of quickly achieving strategic nuclear parity with the United States.

The inability of the Soviet Union to achieve such a vital goal of national security forced a reevaluation of defense policies, causing the Kremlin to recognize the need for a strong and balanced naval presence that would prove equally useful in peace and in war. More than just correcting a deficiency in ships, as Burke suggested, the Soviets were correcting their entire notion of the utility of sea power. This correction, long overdue in the minds of naval professionals like Admiral Gorshkov, eventually turned the Soviet Navy into one of the most powerful fleets in the world. After 1962, the Cold War at sea was never the same.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Books**

- Achkasov, V.I., and N.B. Pavlovich. *Soviet Naval Operations in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945*. Translated by U.S. Naval Intelligence Command Translation Project and Members of the Naval Reserve Intelligence Command Translations Unit 0166. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1981.
- Freedman, Lawrence. *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2000.
- Fursenko, Aleksandr, and Timothy Naftali. *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1997.
- Gorshkov, S.G. *The Sea Power of the State*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979.
- Gorshkov, Sergei G. *Red Star Rising at Sea*. Translated by Theodore A. Neely, Jr., edited by Herbert Preston. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1974.
- Herrick, Robert Waring. *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy: Gorshkov's Inheritance*. Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1988.
- Higham, Robin, and Frederick W. Kagan, eds. *The Military History of the Soviet Union*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Jane's Fighting Ships Publishing Company, Ltd. *Jane's Fighting Ships, 1962-1963*. London: Jane's Fighting Ships Publishing Company, Ltd., 1962.
- Kaplan, Stephen S., with Michael Tatu, Thomas W. Robinson, William Zimmerman, Donald S. Zagoria, Janet D. Zagoria, Paul Jabber, Roman Kolkowicz, Alvin Z. Rubinstein, David K. Hall, and Colin Legum. *Diplomacy of Power: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1981.
- McAuliffe, Mary S., ed. *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*. Washington, D.C.: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992.
- MccGwire, Michael [sic]. *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1987.

- MccGwire, Michael, Ken Booth, and John McDonnell, eds. *Soviet Naval Policy: Objectives and Constraints*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975.
- Muir, Malcolm, Jr. *Black Shoes and Blue Water: Surface Warfare in the United States Navy, 1945-1975*. Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1996.
- Palmer, Michael A. *Origins of the Maritime Strategy: The Development of American Naval Strategy, 1945-1955*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990.
- Pavlov, A.S. *Warships of the USSR and Russia, 1945-1995*. Translated by Gregory Tokar, edited by Norman Friedman. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997.
- Podvig, Pavel, ed. *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Rohwer, Jürgen, and Mikhail S. Monakov. *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet: Soviet Naval Strategy and Shipbuilding Programmes, 1935-1953*. Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001.
- Spinardi, Graham. *From Polaris to Trident: Development of US Fleet Ballistic Missile Technology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Zubok, Vladislav, and Constantine Pleshakov. *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Zumwalt, Elmo R. *On Watch: A Memoir*. New York: Quadrangle, 1976.

## Articles

- Desch, Michael C. "'That Deep Mud in Cuba:' The Strategic Threat and U.S. Planning for a Conventional Response during the Missile Crisis." *Security Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 317-351.
- Goldstein, Lyle J., and Yuri M. Zhukov. "A Tale of Two Fleets: A Russian Perspective On the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean." *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 27-64.

## Documents

- Malinovsky, R., and M. Zakharov. "Memorandum, R. Malinovsky and M. Zakharov to Commander of Group of Soviet Forces in Cuba, 8 September 1962." *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=522](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=522).



Soviet General Staff. "Diagram of the Organization of the Group of Soviet Forces for 'Anadyr.'" 20 June 1962, *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=102](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=102).

Tikhmenev, V. "Memorandum of Conversation of A.I. Mikoyan with Fidel Castro, Oswaldo Dorticos Torrado, Raul Castro, Ernesto Guevara, Emilio Aragones and Carlos Rafael Rodriguez. (4 Nov. 1962)." *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), [http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=32](http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=32).

## **Other**

Central Intelligence Agency. *CIA's Analysis of the Soviet Union, 1947-1991*. 2 CD-ROM set. Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001.